



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



SD ELKS ASSOCIATION DONATES MONIES TO FUND FLAGS AT MEDAL OF HONOR MONUMENTS

The South Dakota Elks Association has a long history of supporting veterans, military personnel, and their families. Thomas Adams, State President of the South Dakota Elks Association, presented the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs with a check for \$800 for the Medal of Honor Monument flag fund.

"The South Dakota Elks Association has been providing South Dakota, United States of America, and POW flags for the Medal of Honor Monuments since 2002," said Adams. "This is just one of many programs that are designed to keep true to the Elks pledge: 'So long as there are veterans, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks will never forget them.'"

"The Department is honored to assist the Elks with this project," said SDDVA Public Information Officer Audry Ricketts. "We are thankful for the Elks' continued support of these monuments and appreciate the communities of Sisseton, Sturgis, Sioux Falls, Brookings, Spearfish, Toronto, and Hot Springs for their work in preserving these monuments."

The Medal of Honor is the highest military decoration awarded by the United States government. It is bestowed on a member of the United States armed forces who distinguishes themselves conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of their life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States. Because of the nature of its criteria, the medal is often awarded posthumously.



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SIoux FALLS VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM BEGINS COVID-19 VACCINE DISTRIBUTION

The Sioux Falls VA Health Care System has begun COVID-19 vaccination with the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine following the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Emergency Use Authorization for this vaccine.

"The Sioux Falls VA is eager to offer the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to health care personnel and community living center residents," said Erin Bultje, SFVAHCS Public Affairs Officer. "Receiving the vaccine is like having hope delivered. As vaccine supplies increase, our ultimate goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccination to all veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated."

The Sioux Falls VA is one of 113 VA Medical Centers across the country to receive the first limited supply of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine. Sites were identified based on need for the vaccine according to CDC's 1A prioritization and capacity to store the vaccine at -20°C.

The Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was 94 percent effective in clinical trials in preventing COVID-19 disease. The vaccine is administered in two doses, 28 days apart. The side effects appear similar to those of other vaccines and are short-lived.

Thirty-seven medical centers began offering the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to health care personnel and veterans Dec 14. Fifteen additional VA facilities received an allocation of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine the week of December 21.

Even after receiving COVID-19 vaccination, employees and veterans should continue wearing face coverings, practicing physical distancing, and washing hands often.

As vaccines become available for more groups of veterans, VA care teams will reach out to eligible veterans to schedule vaccinations. There is no need to preregister or go to a facility to sign up.

Veterans can get up-to-date information on VA's [VA COVID-19 vaccine webpage](#), which launched on December 11, 2020, and sign up to receive regular updates on the vaccine on the VA's [Stay Informed](#) page.

BLUE WATER NAVY INTERACTION MAP

Dan Cullen, Fall River CVSO, came across this free interactive map that can help determine if a ship was in the 12-mile presumptive zone or not. The Blue Water navy site was good but now requires paid membership.

[Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act Map - Hill & Ponton, P.A. \(hillandponton.com\)](#). Please note—this is not a VA or DOD website.

VA BLACK HILLS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM BEGINS COVID-19 VACCINE DISTRIBUTION

VA Black Hills Health Care System began COVID-19 vaccinations Monday, December 28, 2020, with the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine following the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Emergency Use Authorization for this vaccine.

"VA Black Hills is excited to offer the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to our health care personnel and Community Living Center veterans," said Teresa Forbes, VABHHCS Public Affairs Officer. "Receiving the vaccine is like having hope delivered. As vaccine supplies increase, our ultimate goal is to offer COVID-19 vaccination to all veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated."

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For more information, please contact Teresa Forbes at 605-490-5074 or teresa.forbes@va.gov.



STATE VETERANS HOME WELCOMES 4,500TH RESIDENT

Hiram Neiffer, a Korean War Veteran and Purple Heart recipient, moved into the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home this week.

All residents are welcomed to the Home on their move in day, but Hiram was afforded a bigger celebra-



tion since he was the 4,500th resident accepted into the Home since opening November 1889.



VA RESUMES OVERPAYMENT NOTIFICATIONS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced its nationwide plan to resume mailing notification letters to veterans, for benefit overpayments placed in suspension from April 3 through Jan. 1, 2021. The collection of these overpayments was deferred to provide financial relief to veterans due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The VA recognizes veterans and beneficiaries may still experience financial distress from COVID-19, and it will continue to offer enhanced relief options for impacted veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “These include extending repayment plans, waivers, compromises, and temporary hardship suspensions. Most importantly, the department will pause collections through October 2021 for veterans who remain in financial hardship and request relief.”

Veterans and beneficiaries with questions regarding benefit overpayments may [submit requests](#) or call 800-827-0648. Call volume is generally lower Tuesday – Friday.

For health care co-payment debts, veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 866-400-1238 or <https://www.pay.gov> for payments.

HELPLINE CENTER AND BLACK HILLS URGENT CARE VOLUNTEER OF THE MONTH

The Helpline Center and Black Hills Urgent Care are pleased to announce that Peter Bonnicksen has been named the December 2020 Volunteer of the Month. Peter was nominated by Black Hills Health Care Fort Meade VA.

The Volunteer of the Month program is sponsored by the Helpline Center and Black Hills Urgent Care, a division of Black Hills Surgical Hospital. Volunteer of the Month recognizes outstanding individuals who make the community stronger through volunteerism.

Peter has been volunteering since 2013, two-to-three days a week at Black Hills Health Care Fort Meade VA, even through COVID19. Peter works the information desks, and Hospice at the VA Hospital. Melody from Black Hills Health Care says, "We have many first time veterans that are unfamiliar with our facility and with his knowledge of the VA, this makes their first visit pleasant."

Peter has been volunteering for seven years in Hospice. He jumped in to lend a helping hand when the hospital was short on volunteers. He is the first face the veterans and their families see when entering the hospital, always smiling and beyond helpful.



Left to right: Audrey Nordine of Helpline Center, Peter Bonnicksen December Volunteer of the Month, and Kathy Minnick of Black Hills Urgent Care and Surgical Hospital.

Helpline Center and Black Hills Urgent Care presented Peter with a framed certificate, a letter from Mayor Allender, and gifts from Black Hills Urgent Care and Surgical Hospital.

For information on volunteer opportunities, please call the Helpline Center at 211 or visit volunteer.helplinecenter.org

SDNG RECEIVES ENVIRONMENTAL AWARD FOR SUSTAINMENT PROGRAM

The National Guard Bureau's Environmental Awards program has awarded the South Dakota Army National Guard with a 2020 Environmental Security Award for outstanding program and initiatives in environmental excellence.

The SDARNG's Construction and Facilities Management Environmental Office received a second place finish in the Sustainability - Non-Industrial Installation award category for significant progress in implementing environmentally responsible practices.

This is the second Environmental Security Award the SDARNG has received in the last three years, receiving a third place finish in the 2018 Sustainability - Team/Individual award category.

The SDARNG's environmental program is responsible with maintaining compliance and improving sustainability management throughout the state. Their gains in waste diversion and compliance - which consists of reduction, re-purposing, recycling and composting, energy recovery, and disposal - have saved the SDARNG in costs, generated recycling revenue, and avoided censures or impediments to training.

Over the past year, one of the program's biggest accomplishments was increasing the statewide waste diversion rate from about 10 to 41 percent, making a significant increase to reach the organization's goal of 60 percent by 2025. Environmental staff have also made strides on revitalizing the Qualified Recycling Program with new standard operating procedures and resolving administrative issues that had stymied commodity sales.

Other sustainability innovations this past year include a restructuring of spill response in the state to integrate engineering and training units, and a solution for pond management and wash rack operations that integrates natural resources techniques.

Some of the program's other efforts recognized includes their processes for inspections, compliance and accountability in support of the Environmental Performance Assessment System; enhanced spill control and prevention training; workspace evaluations to identify facility risks and liabilities; collaboration on hazardous materials planning, and assistance visits to find unconventional solutions in communities with limited recycling vendors.

The environmental program's staff worked with the SDARNG's Operations and Maintenance Branch, maintenance shops, and unit supply personnel throughout the state to empower them to find solutions in communities where there is not a strong recycling culture. With connections in their local areas, these soldiers are able to identify and take advantage of special recycling events or partnerships with businesses, schools, scouting troops, and more that create mutual community and SDARNG benefits.

In areas where recycling vendors are rare or very small, the demand generated by the SDARNG environmental program helps make a difference in supporting or enabling local businesses to meet those needs and create a market for those recycling vendors.

(continued)

SDNG AWARD (CONTINUED)

At Camp Rapid, the SDARNG's sustainability projects are particularly visible for the community, and environmental staff members have been invited to speak at community events and local commerce meetings about how their programs could be enacted in the private sector. SDARNG has also hosted several tours for the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, inviting students in the Sustainable Infrastructure Program to explore real-world applications, such as green roof installation to lighting retrofits.

Additionally, environmental staff have hosted Earth Day Expo children's programs for Rapid City and park cleanups with local schools, made presentations to Boy and Girl Scout troops and school groups on topics ranging from recycling to pollinator habitat, and they are regularly invited to participate in community fairs and events.

To make achievements and have an impact in any environmental program, members of the environment program team say it begins at the lowest level with the people, who must take the initiative and put in the work to make success possible.

VA, AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION PARTNER TO HELP VETERANS DIAGNOSED WITH LUNG DISEASE

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced its partnering with the [American Lung Association](#) to help veterans, diagnosed with lung disease, live healthier lives.

The partnership will increase veterans' access to [information about lung disease](#) and resources.

"This collaboration will promote effective coping strategies designed to slow the progression of lung disease and offer support networks to help veterans and their caregivers," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "VA researchers are dedicated to learning more about diseases that impact both veterans and humankind to help with prevention and treatment."

The VA and the Lung Association will also join forces on training and educational opportunities for their health care professionals to share best practices for the delivery of health care services and treatment for veterans.

In 2018, there were more than 36 million people in the United States living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, and other chronic lung diseases. A 2016 study led by VA found an increase in lung disease among veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The VA and the Lung Association are working to develop state of the art, evidence-based treatment for the diseases.

SUICIDE PREVENTION EFFORTS USHER PROMISE OF HELP FOR ALL AMERICANS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the completion of all 2020 priorities established under the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) to end suicide through seamless access to care, a connected research ecosystem and robust community engagement aimed at changing the culture around mental health care and ultimately preventing suicide among veterans and all Americans.

President Trump released the PREVENTS roadmap in June 2020 and to date, PREVENTS has accomplished all nine priorities for the year, including:

- Launching REACH as a national public health campaign aimed at empowering all Americans to play a critical role in preventing suicide.
- Garnering signatures from 42 States and one U.S. Territory on a PREVENTS State Proclamation outlining agreed-upon practices and steps to engage their citizens in suicide prevention.
- Partnering with the VA and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes to create a Wellbeing in the Workplace Pledge and Guide to encourage companies to prioritize the mental health and wellness of their employees. More than 50 major U.S. companies and organizations have already signed the pledge.

"We have adopted a public-health approach to suicide prevention that enlists all Americans to recognize the signs of those who are vulnerable and connect them to resources that can help," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "I want every veteran to know that the VA is here for you, and we will not relent in our efforts to reach those who are struggling and connect them with lifesaving support."

Achieving the 2020 milestones is fulfilled by the launch of the Suicide Prevention Grand Challenge under a partnership among PREVENTS and the VA Innovation Center in collaboration with the VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention — who will host a summit in February 2021 with experts in technology, mental health, suicide prevention, and related fields to help guide the planning and implementation for the challenge.

The summit will build upon success and lessons learned from The White House Summit on Veterans Suicide held in September 2019, and guide efforts for launching, running, judging, and selecting winners of individual competitions in the Suicide Prevention Grand Challenge. For inquiries on the summit, please contact VASPGChallenge@va.gov.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan 1—State Offices are closed

Jan 12—Governor's State of the State Address—1:00 pm (CT)

Jan 13—SDDVA/SD Veterans Council Legislative Reception

Feb 19-21—American Legion Mid-Winter Conference—Oacoma

Apr 9-10—DAV State Convention—Rushmore Hotel and Suites—Rapid City

Aug 16-19—SDDVA Annual Benefits School—Ramkota Hotel—Pierre



Community Action for Veterans (CAV) is excited to announce a virtual state visit from the office of the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) occurring February 4-5, 2021.

The event will cover the PREVENTS program, initiatives occurring across South Dakota, and round table discussions by stakeholders including first responders, mental health workers, tribal communities, military/veteran organizations, and other community leaders.

Please save the date and look for further information in the new year.

Audry Ricketts, Public Information Officer

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